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Regional leaders wary of Contra aid

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Despite a growing disaffection with its policy on the part of Central American governments, the Reagan administration plans to press ahead in Congress this week for its \$100 million aid package of support for the Nicaraguan resistance.

Military aid was ended nearly two years ago, and the Reagan proposal would revive it to the tune of \$70 million, a move that faces strong congressional opposition.

While the president is expected to deliver soon a rousing televised speech for the Contras, according to White House sources, the recent elections of new presidents in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras has helped change the diplomatic mix in this volatile region of the world.

One effect is to make prospects for congressional passage even poorer than last year when legislators grudgingly approved \$27 million in humanitarian assistance.

The most disturbing shift in this context has occurred in Costa Rica where President-elect Oscar Arias already has publicly put distance between himself and the United States on the question of support for anti-Sandinista rebels.

Mr. Arias, who will be inaugurated in May, said recently in a U.S. television interview:

"If I were President Reagan, I would give those funds to Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras in economic aid, instead of military aid to the Contras."

Last month, he strongly supported the outgoing government's request that the Contadora nations — Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela — establish an international force to police the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border.

At the same time, Guatemala's new president, Vinicio Cerezo, has pledged his country to "active neutrality" in Central America's conflicts, although he has underlined his preference for democratic regimes.

Nevertheless, Mr. Cerezo too has been skeptical of further U.S. assistance to the anti-Sandinista forces, and has expressed his preference for a negotiated solution to the region's problems.

But the critical piece in the strategic puzzle is Honduras. Like Costa Rica and Guatemala, a new president has been elected, but the policy that Jose Azcona Hoyo will follow is still far from clear.

The stakes, however, are high. Honduras has been the reluctant host to the bulk of the anti-Sandinista forces and their principal military arm, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the FDN. For the present, President Azcona is maintaining a freeze on shipments of humanitarian aid imposed last October. Roberto Suazo Cordoba, after the FDN permitted a U.S. television camera crew to accompany one flight.

"Those rebels should be in Nicaraguan territory, fighting the Sandinistas," Carlos Montoya, the president of Honduran congress, and an associate of President Azcona told the Reuters news agency last week. The statement was the first public admission by a Honduran official that the anti-Sandinista forces were based in Honduras. It also shows a near universal hope in that country that the rebels will become more aggressive by fighting exclusively on Nicaraguan soil.

While Honduras' interruption of the aid flow is a vivid example of the nervousness over any publicity surrounding a supposedly covert program, the move also was seen as an effort on the part of Tegucigalpa to pry more economic and military assistance from the United States.

Honduran officials for years have felt that their country has been America's best ally in the region, but the resource flow has not equaled their commitment. That frustration is matched by a fear that in time the U.S. will pull out of Central America, leaving Honduras to face alone a neighbor who is much better armed.

Placing added pressure on Mr. Reagan's support for the anti-Sandinistas is the announcement last week that eight Latin American nations have completed details on a Central American peacekeeping force designed to stop further clashes on the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border.

If successful, such a force would undercut the efforts of other anti-Sandinista rebels led by a former Sandinista commander, Eden Pastora. It also would remove a major irritant between Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Earlier, Sandinista counterraiders on Costa Rican territory pushed normally neutral San Jose into bitter denunciations of Nicaraguan aggression driving Managua further into isolation.

But Nicaraguan officials have recently and deftly moved out of the corner they had so assiduously painted themselves in earlier, adding to Washington problems.